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ON PAGE 28

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University of death

ATLANTA



Mr Mitchell WerBell III runs an academy based upon the uncompromising principle that international terrorism can best be reduced by doing to terrorists what they do to others: that is, by killing them. Some 220 graduates have learnt how to apply this leaden rule since the Cobray anti-terrorist training centre opened its electronically operated gates on Mr WerBell's 66-acre estate near Powder Springs, Georgia, about a year and a half ago.

For a fee of \$3,000 a head, Mr WerBell and his staff of 10 conduct a 10-day, 21-subject course in aggressive means of survival. Students are taught the death-dealing rudiments of the martial arts; the use of firearms; the operation of unconventional weapons; the techniques of countering snipers; the art of evasive driving; the application of emergency medical techniques; and the ins and outs of similar subjects not on offer at more mundane colleges.

Cobray, a portmanteau blend of "cobra" and "moray eel", is staffed by ex-policemen, ex-soldiers and even ex-spies. Among them have been a former captain in the navy, an old associate of

Mr WerBell's in the Office of Strategic Services (the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency) and an ex-soldier who claims to have killed more than 100 people in the Vietnam war.

The grounds are circled by high fences; attack dogs roam the premises; and, as Mr WerBell explains: "There are armed personnel all over the place, and it's lit up like a stadium at night". A sign at Cobray declares: "Interested in Life After Death? Trespass Here."

The clientele at Cobray has included various kinds of policemen and the bodyguards of corporate executives and heads of state. Members of the United States Labour party, an anti-Semitic right-wing group, are reported to have been trained there. Not surprisingly, some students have preferred to remain anonymous, but the aura of intrigue at Cobray is offset by those who are there merely to learn how to defend themselves, their families and their property.

Among the most conspicuous recent graduates has been Mr Hassan Durrani, a New York businessman and claimant to the throne of Afghanistan. Mr Durrani, King Hassan I to his followers, says

that he is the son of Amanollah Khan, who seized the throne in 1919, sought to westernise the country, but abdicated in 1929 after a reactionary revolt that anticipated the fall of the Shah of Iran half a century later. Mr WerBell has been appointed lieutenant-general of the Royal Free Afghan Army.

Mr WerBell's life has been full of exploits. He served with the OSS in China in the second world war. He then went into business, visibly, as an international arms dealer and, invisibly, it is said, as a part-time CIA agent. Mr WerBell denies any postwar connection with the agency, but he does not dispute reports that he was actively on the scene at many of the world's trouble spots over the past 30 years. In Vietnam, for instance, he is said to have masterminded the use of silenced sniper weapons (with a silencer that he invented).

Some of his other projects of a more entrepreneurial character placed him temporarily at odds with various arms of the American government. Disputes arose, for instance, over a planned coup in Haiti in the late 1960s and over a design to separate the Abaco islands from the government of the Bahamas.

In 1974 the American treasury seized some 3,400 M-10 sub-machineguns of Mr WerBell's because, it is said, Mr Robert Vesco had sought to buy a number of them. The guns were later returned in exchange for Mr WerBell's agreement to stop making arms.

Apart from his lifelong aversion to communism, Mr WerBell claims to be apolitical. None the less, he and some of his associates blame many of the country's current woes on the Trilateral Commission, a think-tank sponsored by Mr David Rockefeller. Its members have included President Carter and Mr George Bush.

Mr WerBell believes that what he terms the commission's policy of "controlled economic disintegration" will lead to a breakdown of civilisation in America by 1984. In the cities, especially, he feels, the "haves" will need to protect themselves against foraging gangs of "have-nots". At that point, Mr WerBell believes, Cobray training will come in handy for its graduates.